

CYBHI Audiocast, Humboldt Transcript

Lorelle Wien:

As the demand for mental health professionals continues to rise in California and beyond, so too does the need to increase interest among young people in pursuing careers in the mental health field. Career Technical Education programs, or CTE programs, are one promising strategy for building students' interest in pursuing careers in mental and behavioral health. These programs expose high school students to a variety of related professions, both through the classroom as well as through offsite experiences in the field. In this audio cast, you'll hear about how the Humboldt County Office of Education has piloted a mental health CTE elective course in four local school districts. The goals of this course are twofold, increasing students' interest in the field, while also aiming to build a local mental and behavioral health workforce. You will also hear about how one local school, Hoopa Valley High School, is implementing a culturally responsive and sustaining mental health CTE course.

Hi, my name is Lorelle Wien. In addition to my voice, you'll hear from Colby Smart, Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services at HCOE¹, Peter Stoll, Director of Prevention and Intervention Services at HCOE and Shoshoni Gensaw-Hostler, Yurok Tribal Member and Teacher of the Mental Health CTE course at Hoopa Valley High School located on the Hoopa Valley Reservation. Humboldt County and the Hoopa Valley Reservation are nestled within Northern California's picturesque Redwood Coast. To start us off, here's Colby sharing a bit about the local area and the students who are served by the TK-12² education community.

Colby Smart:

Our community up here in Humboldt County, we are unique among coastal communities in that we're considered rural for the most part. Our largest city is Eureka, California, approximately 28,000 people in the city limits. We've got an incredibly diverse community in that we've got about 18,000 students total in the TK-12 system. About 10% of those are Native American indigenous tribes who are home to the three largest Native American tribes in terms of geography and population in the state of California, so we've got a rich, vibrant history and cultures up here. About 24% of our student population is Hispanic. We have a relatively high number of socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Approximately 52% of students in our county qualify for free and reduced. We also have a high number of foster homeless youth per capita when we compare that against the rest of California, and that goes the same for homeless students as well, both sheltered and unsheltered.

Lorelle Wien:

A key challenge for many rural communities is proximal access to services and resources. Peter and Colby emphasize the importance of inter-agency alignment and collaboration to create an ecosystem of wellbeing supports for children and youth in Humboldt County.

¹ HCOE: Humboldt County Office of Education

² TK-12 refers to the Transitional Kindergarten through 12th grade education system

Peter Stoll:

We're in a rural community with 31 school districts. Some are tiny school districts, some are larger school districts. Our entire student population could fit into a larger district in Southern California, so it's a very unique dynamic in that way. What we need to do is build collaborative relationships and share this responsibility for mental health service delivery. We have some good examples at the Humboldt County Office of Education of funding positions that have been created through shared funding between the Department of Health and Human Services and the Humboldt County Office of Education. We're constantly looking at how can we identify funding sources and start braiding that funding so that we can enrich the service that's delivered countywide. This is true of all organizations and systems, but it's exceptionally true in rural California that we can't work in silos, that we really need to be looking at our service delivery matrix as a net. The more that we can tighten that net and catch people in need and get preventative and make sure that we have programs in place that have an eye on prevention and early intervention, that's going to be essential.

Colby Smart:

Anytime we can get together multiple agencies to talk about a centralized challenge, in this case, developing mental health career workforce, is a good thing because it allows us to bring our various lenses to the table to ultimately create a more holistic and more impactful opportunity for kids. One thing that it's important to always do when you embark on an adventure like this is to never be content with the people in the room. You always want to ask the question, who else isn't in the room that we're not considering because there'll be new partners entering that maybe we didn't think of, or maybe one of the advisory council members have identified somebody that would add a lot of value to the process, and so we're always open to expanding who's at the table.

Lorelle Wien:

In 2021, the Humboldt County Office of Education, HCOE, and the Vesper Society, a nonprofit organization that works to improve the quality of life in underserved communities in California, joined efforts to develop a shared goal for strengthening and expanding the county's mental health workforce. Since then, the HCOE and the Vesper Society expanded their partnership to include the Cal Poly Humboldt Social Work Department, Two Feathers Family Services, four school districts and other local agencies. Together, the agencies seeded the development of a mental health CTE course in local high schools, which they hope to eventually align to A through G requirements. A-G refers to the academic requirements for being eligible to attend a university in the University of California system.

Colby Smart:

With that partnership established, the first task was to identify what are the true needs of our community. We did an analysis of the current workforce needs, but also the projected workforce needs, and then also we did an analysis of what already is happening inside secondary educational settings. What we discovered is that we do have some semblance of a health pathway in many of our high schools, but there really was an opportunity to fill a gap around mental health career pathways. We

identified local community partners who were representative of our larger group that knew something about mental health career pathways. We decided to develop a course that not only gave academic exposure and opportunities for learning for students, but also clinical opportunities, partnering with those community partners. Right now we're running a pilot. We're in our first year, just about getting ready to be done with our first year, with four local high schools. We've developed a full-year elective course right now for CTE, but we have plans to align that to A-G and to create a long-term CTE pathway which includes at least two courses.

Peter Stoll:

When we look at the workforce for behavioral health, mental health here in Humboldt County, the Career Technical Education aspect, it is really important to give that introductory. Then the other piece is for us to build partnerships with agencies and our local university. We've been also doing that. We need to create opportunities so that when people are graduating out of specialization courses that we can provide them with internship opportunities and enriching opportunities so that we can capture that workforce and try to maintain that in Humboldt County. We have a lot of areas of disproportionality when it comes to special education, people living with pretty severe mental health realities. We recognize that this is a generational challenge, I should say. From the get-go, we're not looking at this as something that will be one and done in a year, but we want to be instrumental in helping to develop a generational solution to the challenges that this county has been experiencing over a generation.

Another goal would be to secure teaching staff that have career and technical education accreditation and interest in this. Whoever's listening out there, Humboldt County is a wonderful place to have an educational career, contact Colby and I if you'd like to teach this course. We're actively recruiting, and again, that speaks to our partnerships.

Lorelle Wien:

Peter also emphasized the important role that every adult on a school campus can play in serving the mental and behavioral health needs of young people.

Peter Stoll:

When we talk about mental health workforce, we need to be looking at all educators and paraprofessionals as mental health interventionists. Our systems are really starting to shift in that direction and any educator can attest to that responsibility. The more that we can create that culture of support and awareness, whether it's through trainings around suicide prevention or looking at youth mental health first aid or even restorative practice, all of those work hand in hand to create a network of support for students. The richer that becomes, the more awareness builds in our community, and I honestly think the more work opportunities are generated through an awareness of what building those types of systems entail. It will be licensed professionals, but it will also be paraprofessionals that can work with students, people that are housing after school educational enrichment programs and across the board.

Lorelle Wien:

As a result of Humboldt County's cross agency collaboration efforts, the county is piloting mental health CTE courses across four high schools for the 2022-2023 school year. One of these high schools is Hoopa Valley High School, located on the Hoopa Valley Reservation. According to 2022 data from the California School Dashboard, Hoopa Valley High serves 267 students, 82% of which are indigenous or Native American. Let's hear from Shoshoni Gensaw-Hostler, who is co-teaching the pilot CTE course at Hoopa Valley High. Here, Shoshoni shares about the connection between mental health, wellness, identity, culture, and community, and how she centers this connection in her class.

Shoshoni Gensaw-Hostler:

I am a mother of four, first and foremost, and I am a regalia maker. I am a Yurok Tribal Member. I have multiple tribal descendancies. That's a big part of my identity as far as participating in our culture and our ceremonies. I think just the way in which my worldview is sculpted is from that space, and that's what I bring to this class. It's a CTE course or it's a career track for high school students thinking about careers in the field of mental behavior health. It's also an area G elective. This is the first year that in Humboldt County this course has been offered. It's being offered at four different high schools, Hoopa High being one of them, and so the only high school on an Indian reservation. I think it's really important that it's offered there and that is offered by indigenous people.

I co-teach this class with Lewis Scott. His background is in kinesiology and physical education. Then I come in with a psychology background. I think that's important because we've really structured the class to look at wellness as a whole and really talk about that. You hear a lot about trauma-informed care in schools, but more than trauma-informed care is this wellness approach that inherently people have the right to be well for the sake that they deserve that right. Thinking about the class in that way, that we both have our areas of expertise that we're bringing in and that we have this understanding that our physical, our spiritual, our mental health, our emotional health has to be well. How do we talk about that and how do we broaden this definition of what our students might expect mental behavioral health to be so that they can really feel like it's relevant to them and to their own mental health and to their own self?

Then how do they decide how to put that forth into our community? That's really the approach that we started off with. Then we looked at the requirements to teach this course, and we feel like we incorporate that, but we really want it to be something that is really grounded and rooted in our community, and so thinking about that.

Lorelle Wien:

As Shoshoni and her co-teacher, Lewis, designed the course, they adapted the syllabus to center indigenous experiences and perspectives. Shoshoni emphasized the importance of not just giving students access to mental health content and a potential career pathway, but also ensuring that young people are able to see themselves within the course and within the mental health field at large, and that they consider mental health approaches that are relevant to them and their communities.

Shoshoni Gensaw-Hostler:

At week six, we really looked at the career aspect because that was built into the curriculum. This is to really give them an idea of what the field of mental behavioral health is, what are some of their interests, whether they're interested in going into the field and what that might consist of. We did a career zone profiling in there. Then also whichever career fields that they were really interested in, we tied back to the field of mental behavioral health. Even if they didn't feel like it was relevant, we talked about how it's important to relate to people and how these mental behavioral health topics can really benefit that field even if it doesn't seem like it's a traditional mental behavioral health field.

Self-care, the grieving process, and self-reflection were vaguely mentioned into the course description when we first initially got it. This has felt really relevant to our community. It was relevant to what was happening within the school at that time. We had youth that were grieving the loss of a student. We had youth that were really grieving and going through some things at this time, and so we really just took the time to talk about what does a grieving process look like. What does it look like from a western perspective? What does it look like in our indigenous communities? What does it look like within your own home? Do you guys talk about that or not? How could we utilize some skills to take care of ourselves and identify what those are, give our peers some more support and some ideas about how they could take care of themselves?

Lorelle Wien:

Shoshoni gave an example of how her class uses genograms to make connections between history, family, health and wellbeing. A genogram is a visual display of family relationships, medical history, and generational patterns, including psychological factors.

Shoshoni Gensaw-Hostler:

We did genograms in the class, and actually when we were reflecting back on one of the most impactful lessons that we went over, a lot of them mentioned the genogram. I thought the genogram was fitting, because, especially in indigenous communities, we often say, "Who's your relation? Who's your family?" Because we are so tight-knit and integrated, that tells me a lot about you if I know who your family is. It gives me a lot of context and that's so important in our communities and something we value. We had them initially do a genogram for themselves, just a real simple one. They also interviewed another partner in the class and then recorded their genogram. How does it feel to ask questions and then be the recorder of this information to paint the picture and give context to this person's life? What does that look like?

Lorelle Wien:

Shoshoni also shared how the course is rooted in thousands of years of indigenous knowledge and how the course aims to help young people develop practical skills for self and community care.

Shoshoni Gensaw-Hostler:

We've really come at this course from a place of presenting evidence-based practices and also practice-based knowledge because it's in an indigenous community. We want to acknowledge and utilize that practice-based knowledge that through thousands of thousands of years has proven to be effective and it works and it feels genuine and authentic and people will utilize it within this community. That's such a strength. Really, we went to what skills or knowledge would we have really loved as youth? What would've been really critical to being able to maybe handle trauma or handle life's difficulties that we didn't have as youth that we would've really appreciated and loved? Also thinking about what are the skills needed for them to come up with their own? How do you decipher and come up with a decision that works for you? How do you give understanding and context to your fellow person so that you can be supportive? Working on those supportive skills throughout the course.

Lorelle Wien:

Shoshoni went on to share advice on incorporating a culturally responsive approach to mental health, emphasizing the importance of listening to community voices and respecting cultural traditions.

Shoshoni Gensaw-Hostler:

Our value systems are different, and so if you want to connect to us and you want us to receive services, it's got to feel genuine and authentic to who we are. When it doesn't, it doesn't matter if the service is available. They're not going to connect to it. We want all good things for our community. We want all good things for every community. We're world renewal people, and so we're praying for the whole world, and we want good for everybody's community, including our own. If you are a mental health provider and you don't have the cultural understanding, you need to get that. Right? It's important to build that into the curriculum period, whether you are indigenous and you're working in an indigenous community or you're a non-indigenous person and you're working wherever. That's important. Also, the acknowledgement of why services haven't really been just fully adopted. Right? It's because they don't feel good and they need to feel good. The basis of that is relation. Right? How are we in relation to each other?

Lorelle Wien:

Building a local mental and behavioral health support system for children and youth is a community effort. As we've heard from educational leaders in Humboldt County and the Hoopa Valley Reservation, it's important not only to build individual and collective capacity, but to do so in a way that centers the unique experiences, wisdom, and aspirations of each community. It's also important to know when to bring in new perspectives. In closing, Colby and Peter shared their advice and lessons learned from the importance of reaching out to learn from others and to forge a stronger network.

Colby Smart:

Don't be afraid to start. Ask lots of questions and don't think that you have to invent the wheel. There's a lot of work that's been done. There's a lot of resources out there. Perhaps the most important resource is your community. If you don't know who your local mental health professionals are in your

community, use this as an opportunity to introduce yourself because the resources are there. They're rich in experience. Just don't be afraid to try and ask questions. Take time to plan into vision. Know what you're trying to accomplish before you start making a bunch of decisions.

Peter Stoll:

This work is already being done in other parts of California, so feeling like you're doing this in isolation is going to be a hindrance. We really need to be communicating throughout the state and looking at model sites, model programs, asking those questions, sharing materials, doing that. If it wasn't for the state network of individuals that I've been blessed to work with over the past years, we wouldn't be where we are at, or I certainly wouldn't have the vision and some of the wisdom I have in what these next steps would be. It's really by saying, "Help me. Help me understand this better." That has been an incredible asset. Even being able to have conversations like we've been having, again, it tightens that net and it builds that network so that we can be more effective at what we're doing.

Lorelle Wien:

Thank you to Colby, Peter, and Shoshoni for sharing how they're increasing access to mental and behavioral health services for youth in Humboldt County and the Hoopa Valley Reservation. We hope you enjoyed this audio cast, which is part of a series of stories highlighting promising practices across California to support children and youth, mental and behavioral health, and wellbeing. The series is supported by California's Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative, an historic \$4.7 billion investment by the state of California to enhance, expand, and redesign the systems that support behavioral health for children and youth across the state.